

Berklee College of Music

# **PROJECTED SELF**

**A Live Audiovisual Performance Exploring  
Fear, Depression, Anger, and Acceptance**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of  
Master of Music in Music Production, Technology, and Innovation

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My family, who even across an ocean remain a constant source of strength.

My friends, who helped me lift me up when I was low.

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The Berklee faculty and staff who provided a safe place for me to study, work, and grow.

## Abstract

*Projected Self* is a solo audiovisual performance from the artist **C. Watson** of original experimental music & video. Using pre-rendered visuals and live manipulated effects, the performance explores mental health themes of anxiety, depression, self-hatred, rage, and finally acceptance. Instead of simply telling a story about a mental health journey, *Projected Self* uses light and sound to bring the audience on the journey along with the artist; to evoke the feelings in the audience and not just explain them. The music borrows heavily from experimental music genres such as noise and drone while also retaining more rhythmic themes present in electronica and trap. The project went through multiple iterations until an ideal technical setup for one performer was developed. For the artist, writing, editing, mixing, filming, synthesizing visuals, and prepping a performance performing all while dealing with anxiety, fear, and depression was exceedingly difficult but after sharing the multiple versions of *Projected Self* with peers and Berklee faculty, the response started to show that people did in fact feel the emotions portrayed. In the future, the project has the potential to evolve into multiple new mediums—film, art gallery installation, interstitial during a longer set—but all in all, the project was a successful study in shared emotional experience.

## 1. Introduction

People tend to identify themselves with their thoughts. “I think, therefore I am”—the classic line from Descartes—is commonly distorted into “what I think is who I am”. This association of one’s identity with their thoughts can often cause problems when thoughts are unhealthy or even dangerous. Mindfulness research has focused on better understanding one’s thoughts and allowing them to exist rather than forcing them away or completely believing in them without analysis<sup>1</sup>. Many people are well aware the feelings of shame, self-doubt, fear, anxiety, and depression do exist, but when those feelings are a constant hum in the back of one’s mind, day in and day out, it can become unbearable. When these constant thoughts bring forth one’s deepest insecurities and fears and make them real, one can easily feel hopeless and stuck, even while remaining unaware that these thoughts are not absolute truth. One can become jaded and subconsciously press down their own wants, needs, and dreams in an effort to avoid agitating their subconscious mind and triggering these exceedingly uncomfortable feelings. In this way, negative thoughts can manifest and become a monster in their own right, violently and silently tearing us down from the inside.

Simply talking about these feelings, while informative and often therapeutic, is often times inadequate in conveying the gravity of the actual experience of these feelings. It is almost impossible to empathize fully with someone dealing with these issues, even if the concepts are clear. Emotions and mental health issues at their core are internal which usually means invisible. Instead of attempting to describe to an audience with words, for instance, what a panic attack can feel like, *Projected Self* is an attempt to bring the audience through a

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Edward Espe. “Thoughts on Thinking.” Access June 2, 2018.  
<https://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/thoughts-on-thinking>

panic attack using live audiovisual performance as the medium. After all, mental health is inherently an emotional subject; therefore the best way to describe it is through an emotional medium.

*Projected Self* is an audiovisual musical piece that takes an audience on a journey in real time through a mind currently having a panic attack. The idea is to show how massive of a challenge it can be to understand and confront one's own anxiety and depression. Throughout the piece, the performer also physically embodies these emotions using body language and posture.

The music travels through several movements: the first representing the battle within one's mind that can rage on ceaselessly, typically taking the form of distracting thoughts<sup>2</sup>. This is the battle between the calm self-aware mind and the scared, panicking mind. This movement will consist of calming imagery and softer sounds being periodically interrupted with jarring and irregular sounds and visuals. As the movement continues, the interruptions will become more frequent and evident, beginning to overshadow the initial sense of calm into which the audience has been led. This portion of the performance will be performed live as a noise solo. The audience travels with the performer down the spiral that inevitably leads to numbing depression—the focus of the second movement and the first appearance of a humanoid monster meant to represent the overbearing weight of these thoughts, day in and day out. This space is only interrupted by the essential positive message that *Projected Self* hopes to convey—that there is a way out. That these feelings and this numbness can be redirected and converted into something powerful, defiant, beautiful. The final movement is a musical piece consisting of samples from the previous depression and anxiety movements but

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Edward Espe. "Thoughts on Thinking." Access June 2, 2018.  
<https://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/thoughts-on-thinking>

resampled and played rhythmically into a beat that is more danceable and defiant in its sound. Most of all, this final movement shows that the monster is an internal one—just a piece of the whole picture that can be co-opted and used to lift us up and not just hold us down.

## 2. Review of the State of the Art

There are plenty of other examples of live audiovisual interaction in the world of music. Pierce Warnecke and Frank Bretschneider's collaborative works have been influential sonically and visually for *Projected Self*; pairing seemingly simple sounds with tightly-synced visual motifs<sup>3</sup>. Japanese artists Ryoichi Kurokawa<sup>4</sup> and Yousuke Fuyama<sup>5</sup> also embody the same jarring monochromatic imagery that influenced some of the aesthetics of *Projected Self*. Japanese artist Masonna's purely violent and energetic work informed the more rage-centric aspects of *Projected Self* as well as the importance of body language during a live performance<sup>6</sup>. Ben Frost's quiet and haunting work in *By the Throat* was a clear choice when studying the sounds of depression and despair<sup>7</sup>. All in all, these artists match the energy and feel of the harsher moments in *Projected Self*—erratic, jarring, and tightly linked audio and visuals.

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<sup>3</sup> Bretschneider, Frank and F. Pierce Warnecke. "SINN + FORM." CTM/Transmediale, Berlin, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Kurokawa, Ryoichi. "Sirens." Accessed November 21, 2017. <http://www.ryoichikurokawa.com/project/sirens.html/>.

<sup>5</sup> Fuyama, Yousuke. "'Ruins of Prayer' Music Video." Accessed November 21, 2017. <http://www.yousukefuyama.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Masonna, musician, live performance at Kaput - Magazin für Insolvenz & Pop, Tokyo, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, Ben. *By the Throat*. Bedroom Community. HVALUR6, 2009, Album.

Similar in thematic content is Bo Burnham’s performance piece entitled “We Think We Know You” within his comedy special “what.”<sup>8</sup> In it, he has short conversations with different people whose negative words he samples and replays in a musical piece. There is a shared idea of converting hurtful emotions into art.

### **3. Description**

*Projected Self* was conceived, performed, and documented during the 2017-2018 school year. There were several steps: content creation (audio, filmed video, Vsynth renders), prototyping, testing, booking gigs, and finally the performance. The project was presented twice live—first at the Berklee-organized *After-Works* showcase and second at the event *Venga!*.

The music derives from harsh noise, distortion, and drone music while also drawing influence from electronica and trap. Dozens of audio samples are manipulated using various sound design techniques, such as granulation, resampling, FM synthesis, and more. The music is manipulated live using MIDI controllers connected to Ableton. The visuals are all original content: a collection of green screened footage from video shoots and synthesized video created using Vsynth; a series of Max patches that emulate video synthesizers. All visuals were manipulated through a combination of preprocessing using Adobe After Effects, Premiere Pro, and live manipulation during the performance using Resolume Arena. The Vsynth clips are prerendered and launched within Resolume rather than manipulated live through their respective Max patches.

This setup—MIDI controllers, Ableton, Resolume Arena with prerendered clips—

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<sup>8</sup> Burnham, Bo. *what*. DVD. Directed by Bo Burnham and Christopher Storer. Scotts Valley: Netflix, 2013.



was selected for the live performance because of the streamlined nature to reduce CPU usage. The same MIDI controller can control both audio and visual elements simultaneously, making synchronized audio and visuals easier to execute. Ableton and Resolume Arena can be internally routed to communicate with one another. Using pre-rendered clips that are launched in Resolume reduces the CPU strain on the setup allowing it to be performed using one computer. The setup reduces some manipulation possibilities by rendering the clips but there are more than enough Resolume Arena effects to cover the gap.

#### **4. Innovative Aspects**

Exploring the narrative of a live anxiety breakdown using the medium of live music performance is where *Projected Self's* innovation lies. It is an amalgam of many concepts: using experimental music genres to inform the anger and fear sections of the piece; syncing audio and visuals to be more immersive for an audience; combining multiple genres of music that distort and break down to portray the fragility of the mind. The execution and portrayal of the concepts and stages of the mental health journey, by nature of being a personal journey, is unique. Also, the concept of portraying the artist's own anxiety attack live is a new concept.

#### **5. New Skills Acquired**

Composing the music, developing a library of visual clips, and piecing together a cohesive but adaptable live audiovisual performance took a number of different skills to accomplish. The project required skills in using specific technologies—such as the video synthesis patches in Max's Vsynth, Resolume Arena's video effects, video manipulation and

editing using Adobe After Effects and Premiere, an understanding of video codecs and resolutions for optimal performance, and MIDI mapping. It also required more general skills, such as sound design, designing a performance rig, and developing an onstage persona. All these skills are incredibly useful when developing an artist persona in the future. Developing the noise solo section required many of these skills to emerge since synchronizing the images and audio needed to occur live for maximum impact.

## **6. Challenges**

Many challenges arose while working on this project, mostly solved through trial and error. There was constant experimentation with new MIDI controllers to determine what was the easiest/most stable setup. Incorrect video codecs and massive file sizes of video introduced a lot of latency and reduced the performance of the system, which was solved by cutting up shorter clips or reducing the number of MIDI signals traveling between Ableton and Arena. All in all, it was most effective to plow forward and perform the set as is over and over until these issues arose so they could be fixed.

However, the largest challenge of all was not technical, but emotional. Writing a piece about one's own emotions while in the midst of the throes of those emotions is challenging. Many of the negative emotions explored in the piece came up in real time and were very challenging to deal with. The key was to attempt to allow, examine, and channel those emotions back into the art. The inherent discomfort that comes with the process of making art needed to be recognized as inescapable instead of actively avoided. Eventually, having external deadlines, while initially stressful, restricted the amount of time available for second-guessing and self-criticism and allowed the work to progress.

## 7. Future Ramifications

There are many directions that this project can take to continue to evolve. As it is, the piece will need to be packaged and promoted in order to perform it live in as many settings as possible. That way, the content can be continually be exposed to live audiences to gauge their impressions, to collect essential information on how to make the piece most effective. Perhaps the medium of live performance is not the only effective medium for the message. *Projected Self* could be refined, expanded, and if necessary, re-packaged, perhaps as an art gallery installation or short film. The marketing, packaging, and promotion of the piece as a part of the **C. Watson** artist repertoire is essential to having the piece grow to be truly effective.

## 8. Conclusion

*Projected Self* as a piece is an attempt to show the struggles of a person dealing with anxiety in an empathetic way. To show that what goes on inside our heads is not to be feared but to be shared and, in that way, used to bring us closer together. The process of developing *Projected Self* was long and emotionally taxing but inevitably very informative and therapeutic. Fear, anxiety, depression, panic, rage—all these can be converted from enemies into tools for something more, something powerful, and something that can connect us all. We all have our own issues that go on inside our heads but we are not alone in that experience. The technical challenges inherent in the project developed useful skills like video production, audio manipulation, live performance that will continue to be essential throughout the creation and execution of the **C. Watson** artistic persona. The sky is the limit

on this project and has formed a strong backbone upon which future projects can develop. The subject matter is rich and only beginning to be explored. All this was possible because of the courage to not hide one's shortcomings or cower before them but instead to project one's experience, one's mind, one's self for others to see and feel.

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